Clergymen Accuse U.S. of War Crimes

By Leroy F. Aarons
Washington Post Staff Writer

NEW YORK, Feb. 3—A group of religious leaders announced publication today of a study which it claimed documents a pattern of American war crimes in South Vietnam.

The study, in the form of a 421-page soft-cover book entitled "In the Name of America," contrasts press, periodical and book accounts of American activity in South Vietnam with provisions of international law to which the United States is a party, principally the Hague and Geneva Conventions and the Nuremberg principles.

There are about 1000 excerpts from reports of writers and journalists, dealing with such subjects as bombing of civilians, treatment of prisoners, "scorched earth" policy, use of gas and defoliation.

For example, accounts of Allied bombing of civilians are placed in a chapter with provisions of the Hague Convention which prohibit bombardment of "towns, villages, dwellings or buildings which are undefended." The evidence described in these accounts adds up to a persistent pattern of violation of international law, contended the group, Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam.

American conduct in Vietnam, the group charged in a commentary accompanying the study, has broken "almost every established agreement for standards of human decency in time of war."

"Torture, murder, brutal methods of interrogation, mutilation, strangling and extreme physical privation are shadows on our record in Vietnam," it adds. The study covers only South Vietnam, where, the group says, "the major suffering and dislocation are located."

The commentary was signed by 29 leading members of the group, which claims 17,000 members in all, including chairman Dr. Martin Luther King, Dr. John C. Bennett, president of the Union Theological Seminary, and Rabbi Abraham Herschel, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

Dr. Bennett said at a press briefing during the week that the group had published the study to demonstrate the breakdown of America's "Moral constraint" and to bring pressure on the Government to rethink its position.

"I think our Government for the most part is governed by good intentions," he said. "But the weapons they have, the technology in their control gets out of hand to an extent beyond imagination."

This leads to a "technological ruthlessness," which goes beyond the original rationalizations of the war, he added.

Dr. Bennett's view was expanded by Seymour Melman, a Columbia University professor who directed research for the book. Melman theorized that the United States had been driven beyond the bounds of international law by the frustration of trying to fight a guerrilla war by conventional means.

He emphasized, however, that "In the Name of America" is not a legal document, but a "layman's judgment" of the facts presented by reputable journalists and writers.

The clergy group said it would begin a campaign to publicize the study in churches and synagogues. In addition, evey Senator will be given a copy this coming week when clargy and laymen sponsor a two-day mobilization against the war in Washington.